

# The Magical Focus Group? Position the Qualitative Methodology onto the Policy Research Contours

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Using Focus Group (FG) for academic and policy research becomes a phenomenal one to understand the complexity of real life and the matrix of policy making in the last two decades. This paper attempts to critically discuss the comparative advantages of FG investigation, with particular reference to the research on ageing society. After an introduction on FG, the creative FG dynamics and the group processes will be examined in Part 2. Part 3 discusses the discovery process for policy knowledge. The paper ends with critical remarks on the use of FG for academic research and policy learning.

**Key Words :** Ageing, Focus Group, Qualitative Research, Quality of Life, Social Science Research

## 1. The *Magical* Focus Group - The Best Simulated Group Process?

As our captions in this paper suggested and the deliberations that follow, the response to the question(s) are two folded: Focus Groups (FG) are not a substitute for one-to-one interviews, nor they are cheaper version against the latter qualitative research methodology. What is more important is the resilience of FG: not just with the intensive use of FG in social research, but also the wide application beyond the academia: consultancy industry, policy initiatives and politicking (e.g., election engineering in the U.S.A and the U.K.) exercises. FG are considered by academics and the mass media as a vital part of British (New) Labour Party's transformation in general, the rise and fall of the political branding of Tony Blair in particular (Scammell 2007; Macintyre 2000).

In Asia, FG have also put into social development agenda processing too. For instance, they been used

by non-governmental organizations (e.g., the Tsao Foundation) in (a not so liberal society of) Singapore to collect / solicit opinions of senior adults on policies affecting their livelihood regularly, which in turns, feeding into the consultative policy mechanism of the government (*The Strait Times*, 13. November 2008, p.11; Lee 2008).

The ideas and rationale behind FG investigation are maximizing the discovery of ideas and discussion generated from group sessions. More specific, the dynamic dialogues and discussions between and among group members on specific policy issues, which are not normally available under quantitative research methods like questionnaire surveys. Here it is right noted that,

Group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview. Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open ended questions and wishes to encourage research

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participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities. When group dynamics work well the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions. Group work also helps researchers tap into the many different forms of communication that people use in day to day interaction, including jokes, anecdotes, teasing, and arguing. Gaining access to such variety of communication is useful because people's knowledge and attitudes are not entirely encapsulated in reasoned responses to direct questions. Everyday forms of communication may tell us as much, if not more, about what people know or experience. In this sense focus groups reach the parts that other methods cannot reach, revealing dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by more conventional data collection techniques (Kitzinger 1995: 299-230).

To highlight the frequent use of FG for academic and policy research in the last decade: FG become a phenomenal knowledge industry for academic and policy research of its own, as well as an integral part of social science, socio-political engineering (government by focus groups?) and business development in the developed economies, with the following characteristics: as an informative research methodology in qualitative social studies, a good tool to testing out the acceptance for policy initiatives, the agenda-setting exercise for politicking (the election-engineering for obvious reasons), as well as products' branding and marketing purposes. In short, everyone in social sciences and politico-policy circles has been using FG in some form, among other qualitative researches, to make sense of not just social issues and community development (Burton, *et.al.*, 2004), but in some cases, understanding the personal (solely private) aspects of life experience say, sexuality (Overlien, *et.al.*, 2003). For profit-making, FG are also heavily used in branding, marketing and corporate images in the business world (Fallon and Brown 2002).

Given the advanced applications, and the extensive use, of FG in various arenas, it would not be exaggerated to say that, FG have been widely adopted in academic, business, consultancy and policy making circles around the world, and is also achieving certain *magical* status. But the method has its strength and weakness too that:

Focus groups are a contrived form of research,

involving the convening of carefully chosen groups from targeted sectors of the population in order to discuss a particular issue or topic. Their contrived nature leads to both successes and failures for focus group research. On the positive side, focus groups concentrate unequivocally on a chosen issue, leading to the generation of insights not readily obtainable from conventional group or individual interviews. They can also facilitate the disclosure and validation of group attitudes and thinking, while generating a potentially large volume of data in a relatively short period of time. On the negative side, however, focus groups provide an unnatural setting for group interactions, and it would be naive to assume that this technique gives access to 'naturally occurring data' such as might be collected by participant observation (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups also tend to yield less data than do one-to-one interviews, involving the same number of participants. (Fallon and Brown 2002, p.196)

In actuality, the use of FG is many folds, ranging from the testing the specific question(s) in the questionnaire design to the assessment of new policy impact and responses from the stakeholders, and other non-stakeholders, the society at large. If conducted properly, the FG can facilitate the process and subsequently enable the discovery of the diversity and complexity of issues and problems in any policy initiatives.

But most FG studies are not the stand-alone one, and usually are being used in combination of, or as a complementary to, other research methodologies (Kitzinger 1994, 1995; Park and Tritter 2006 ). In spite of the differences in the group formation and intra-group relationships among participants, and the one between the group facilitator (researcher) and the group members, the key issues are the group dynamics and interaction within the group, which all contribute to the success (or failure) of information sharing and discussions relevant to the research objectives. In the following sections, we will discuss group dynamics and the shaping of them by researcher (as facilitator/leader) to achieving social research discovery.

## **2. Creating (Unnatural, Focus) Group: Dynamics, Essence and Inertia?**

Indeed, the FG discussion can generate much needed information, ideas and views on specific

policy issues or the focused research themes. Here, the dynamics of group discussion and communication need to be noted:

Tapping into such interpersonal communication is also important because this can highlight (sub) cultural values or group norms. Through analysing the operation of humour, consensus, and dissent and examining different types of narrative used within the group, the researcher can identify shared and common knowledge. This makes focus groups a data collection technique particularly sensitive to cultural variables – which is why it is so often used in cross cultural research and work with ethnic minorities. It also makes them useful in studies examining why different sections of the population make differential use of health services. For similar reasons focus groups are useful for studying dominant cultural values (for example, exposing dominant narratives about sexuality) and for examining work place cultures the ways in which, for example, staff cope with working with terminally ill patients or deal with the stresses of an accident and emergency department (Kitzinger 1995: 230).

But FG are not natural groups, they are formed (or in some cases, paid) to make sense of the research questions. The selection of membership is already a demanding task – the trade off between the wider representation (heterogeneity, in terms of gender, age and other socio-economic status attributes) and the specific targeted sub-grouping (homogeneity) is always embedded with the dynamics and inertia of the group. The making of a FG is setting the visibility of the research horizons. More specific, the skills requirements for creating and leading FG discussion, for conversational moderator, are no less than any group worker, therefore sometimes with a expensive price to seek for.

Below we will show other four challenges for creating-managing a group process and dynamics for enabling better research finding through FG, so as to highlight its comparative (dis-)advantages.

### **2.1 Ice-Breaking and Who Talks about What?**

FG can be considered as a semi-structured talking group, guided by the research agenda, run by the moderator(s). At the very least, the moderator takes a 'mission-impossible' task to enable members to express as open as possible but with engaging dialogues among members on the chosen topics,

with the ice-breaking initially and to sustain their contribution throughout the group process; s/he should have good group work skills and having the qualities of being good listeners, non-judgmental and adaptable (Gibbs 1999). The basic question is: how to motivate people to talk about something not necessary for their (his/her and others') concerns. Our research experience, in Japan, with a group of female senior adults in a relative natural environment (sport centre) marked the difficulties to sustain the topic(s) of common interest for conversation, as different personalities shape the course of discussion: the more vocal the more likely she could put-through the topic for conversation, given the somewhat social norm for the conflict-or-confrontation avoidance of Japanese.

### **2.2 Moderating the Fellowship: Maximal Dialogues for What Meaning?**

Literatures on FG are all stressing the importance of maximizing participation of the members, with good moderating of the fellowship along the research topics (Kitzinger 1994, 1995): cultivating supportive group milieu for communication to maximize the discussions and exchanges on/beyond the subject matter – as innovative as possible to extend the knowledge horizons on the issue(s). Yet, the promotion for maximal interaction (mostly in verbal communicative terms) has been questioned in terms of the qualities (validity and reliability) of the verbal claims and discussions which are based upon various personal beliefs and bias, embedded in the specific socio-cultural context, at the very least (Warr 2005). Furthermore, the challenge for researcher is to make sense of the discoveries – individual opinions and the idiosyncratic shared experience of group members, which in some instances, beyond the real life experience of the researchers. For example, using FG to study about migrant senior adults' quality of life poses much difficulty for researchers who lack the cross-cultural, or the same age cohort, experience to decode and to interpret, and subsequently making analysis on the verbal and non-verbal communication of the group members.

### **2.3 Engaging Ambiguities, Inconsistencies and Contradictions of FG Content**

Group dynamics represent various forms of (non-)communications, originated by various speakers and respondents with differential interests and motivations; it is not unusual that ambiguities, inconsistencies and contradictions developed

throughout the group process. Contingent upon the different mix of recording devices, note-taking, human and/or digital memories, to make sense out of group discussion is far challenging than one-to-one interview (cf. Watson 2007). And missing links in various part of the discussion are default part of the comprehension of group communication, not least are the primacy and latency memories for any communication on the one hand, and the preconceived (biased) agenda and transcription framing by the researchers (Tilley 2003). In short, the context-experience-embedded specific discussions are real challenge for researchers who try to make sense out of FG encounters.

#### **2.4 Non-Verbal Aspects of FG: the Forgotten or Non-Recordable Dimension?**

Like any artificial grouping aiming for content (opinions and ideas) of the discussions, much of the group dynamics (or inertia), say between the leadership-fellowship, the gate-keeping and the non-verbal aspects of communication have not been fully addressed in the many FG based academic, business and politic-policy studies. This missing (or forgotten dimension) is more than obvious in multiple moderators-run FG. Here, we should point out that, FG is somewhat an extended form of group-interactive interviewing on participants' understanding and positive engagement, verbally and behaviourally, pushing-and-pulling tensions of the members (cf. Gubrium and Koro-Ljung-Berg 2005, p.696). Here, Jowett and O'Tolle (2006) have rightly asked: "*Focus Groups – Whose Focus?*" Obviously, the missing of any one of the two (the verbal and non-verbal) will only get a partial, if not misunderstood, view of the subject matter. For this, our research experience with Japanese senior adults reminds me the important aspect of their behavioural (im)mobility, non-verbal aspects, as well as their verbal communication are equally important for our understanding of their quality of life. Undoubtedly, many FG studies have reported mostly the content (discovery) of the group discussion, but rarely the dynamics and inertia of the group process.

### **3. Making Sense of Ageing Experience: The FG Discovery Process**

Getting old, and ageing, is a historical and experiential process, which is by default a complex and sophisticated life experience and cannot be simplified in terms of quantitative studies, like questionnaire surveys. Here, the complexity of

ageing can be explored and investigated more recently with qualitative methodologies, in-depth interviews and FG in particular (Barter 1999; Becker and Bryman 2004; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). More importantly, the community the ageing takes place is also important: to what extent is the community supportive network to foster good ageing-in-place? The concern for ageing-in-place, and/or active ageing, comprises the following core dimensions: enhancing senior adults' day-to-day autonomy and independence, enriching their Quality of Life (QoL) with good health (Home Office 2004; Lai 2008a/b; WHO 20021/b).

Here, the quality of life (QoL) is an important concern for senior adults, as highlighted in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded multi-methods *Growing Older [GO] Research Programme* 1999-2004 (Walker 2002, 2006; <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/gop/>). The QoL discussions have contributed much to ageing policies development in the U.K. (DWP 2005a/b, 2006). Here, to gauge the extent of ageing processes, focusing the enhancement of senior adults' day-to-day autonomy and independence, FG studies were conducted on: QoL from the Perspectives of Older People, Social Support for Ageing, Old People's Social Participation, Family Life and Ageing and Forms of Community and Institutional Care. The QoL approach for public policy is not a new one. It has been widely adopted by health and health promotion approach. Yet, the intensive and extensive applications of QoL in Active Ageing policy programmes have been enabling much experimentation – in search for best and appropriate practice for ageing population. In other words, The QoL research based and informed policy initiatives are maximally mooted to cope with the all embracing concept for Active Ageing, hence, this momentum for policy and practice learning is further mutually reinforcing with all stakeholders for ageing policy (Walker 2002, 2006).

More importantly, the GO Research Programme generates no less than ten book publications under the Open University Press book series on *Growing Older*, with the following titles: *Ageing Well*, *Older Women's Lives*, *Family, Work and QoL for older people*, *Woman in later life*, *Environment and Identity in Later life*, *Aging in the City*, *The Social World of Older people*, *Growing Older in Europe*, *Growing Older: QoL in old age and Understanding QoL in Old Age*. Not less the 30% of them involving qualitative research methodologies and about one fifth of them using FG, as one of the

research methodologies in the multi-method research programme. These informative evidence and knowledge-based researches undoubtedly have been shaping the research agenda and policy discourses on ageing policy, and the related sharing of knowledge among a wide spectrum of stakeholders, through various forms of exchanges, in the U.K. and internationally. Qualitative research methodologies, the FG in particular, have been also instrumental in making 'Active Ageing' as the 'currency' for policy learning and communication for a quite a long period (DWP 2005a/b, 2006, WHO 2002a/b).

For senior adults who have very rich and quite similar shared life experience, to engaging them in group discussions about their views and expectations on how government for enhancing their ageing QoL is a relative obvious one, as they are more than ready to speak up – evidently shown in the GO Research Programme. Hence, for bridging senior adults' QoL, and their wishes, for public policy development, FG has the comparative advantages over one-to-one interviews (Bowling 1993, 2002; Bowling and Ebrahim 2005).

For example, FG can solicit additional and extensive information. In one of our studies on the use of mobile phone for inter-generational communication; our focus group interviews with middle-aged (40s – 50s) women found that, from their mobile phone use experience with their elders (parents and parents-in-law), the seniors prefer fixed line communication (Lai 2007):

My parent-in-law once told me that "my mobility is more important to me than carrying the mobile phone with me... and I find it stressful to carry [the phone] because I might forget where I left it" (Respondent Q).

In the same study (Lai 2007), the focus group study also discovered that there is no guarantee that the mobile phone systems, as designed, could yield the results expected. As one of our informants said,

I had high expectation for GPS location function, but it turns out only half good! I thought the GPS can help us in "tracking-down" where our parents-in-law [age early 70s], yet we can only know the location of the phones. Not about where they are – as my parents are, like many old people, absent-minded and they tend to leave their phones somewhere around the house or even not carry with them when going out.... It seems that the best way to track them down is stilling using the old way: the fixed line phone

with its recording and answering functions. [We have to use] our previously agreed time of a calling appointment (Respondent P).

Our research experience for engaging senior adults' conversation suggests that they tended to be very, if not over, involving once trust has established, and continuously talking about their life (more or less a version of oral history based in-depth one-to-one-interview). Yet it is more cost-and-time effective to have group discussions rather than the one-to-one interviews as each of them tends to have many stories and wishes to speak about – the group conditions enable and structure a more focused expression of ideas and opinions over the ego-centric one.

Two obvious implications can be drawn from the ageing studies above. First, as rightly pointed out by Bowling (1993) that the success of the method will depend on the theme(s) and the stakeholders, the qualitative research methodologies (semi-structured interview, one-to-one interviews alike) have a comparative advantages over the quantitative one, as their can discover the real life experience of the ageing process: recruitment and willingness of senior adults to participate in FG studies, and the subsequent interactional synergy are somewhat positive (Parker and Titter 2006, pp.26-27).

Second, FG can work well to provide the richest data in relation to the public's views of priorities for health services, against the too-much or too-less information derived from the one-to-one interviews (Bowling 1993, 2002). It is rightly pointed out that

These characteristics of focus group interaction mean that there is less onus on participants to offer consistent reports of opinions and representations of experience. That is, focus group data can be perceived as unreliable because interactions tend to be oriented toward persuading the group rather than expressing "true" opinions. There is limited opportunity, and few good reasons, for participants to contribute extended accounts within the format of group discussions where both time and privacy are restricted. The analytical significance of this is that participants are producing explanations of the everyday self in public arenas. These accounts represent efforts to describe and explain aspects of people's beliefs and experiences to others, particularly to other group members or "insiders" (Agar&MacDonald, 1995) but also for "outsiders" such as researchers (Warr 2005:

203-204).

In short, for cost-effective and timeliness consideration, FG is a good methodological choice to make public policy innovation relevant to ageing life course, as well as the socio-cultural embeddedness, for that particular age cohort.

Yet, it should be pointed out that though senior adults though more or less are willing to share their life experience and voice their view on policy development, they are less articulated in terms of protecting their privacy with self-disclosure – here are the ethical issues for the research at large. This is particularly the case that FG, like other qualitative research works, has the risk to generate unexpected and unpredictable outcomes (Park and Tritter 2006, pp.32-34). Therefore, ethical considerations with appropriate protocols should be in place to protect all stakeholders for the research investigation.

#### **4. FG to Discover Complex Policy Issues and Social Problems**

Focus Group is an interesting discovery process to examine the complexity of policy issues and social problems. But FG is not a cheaper option either, and it can be an expensive one too. Take our case about the FG run by the Tsao Foundation in Singapore. The project, using FG to collect and solicit policy opinions from senior adults (aged over 50 or above), as a platform to empower older people and as a gateway for feeding-back policy responses, is founded with seeding grant of Singaporean \$120,000. from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), with the year-long training for 70 older volunteers to lead the focus groups, as well as working on feedback projects for other non-governmental voluntary groups (*The Strait Times*, 13. November 2008, p.11; Lee 2008).

Though FG is becoming more popular than ever, but there are four obvious caveats, if we examine it against the problems and constraints in fieldwork investigation (Banister 1999; Nilan 2002; Renzetti and Lee 1993; Roulston, *et.al.*, 2003; Simmons and McCall 1969; Temple and Young 2004). First and foremost, the noisy and confusion aspects of FG should be noted:

Focus groups can also be disorderly and noisy as opinions and anecdotes are shared, challenged, and truncated as participants join in, or drop out of, the discussions taking place. However, these issues are not limitations of the method.

Rather, it means that analytical attention should be directed onto the interactions between participants and the ways in which meaning is being jointly created, contested, and reworked within the processes of the group (Warr 2005: 203)

Second, the success (or the failure) of it is much dependent on the positive group dynamics (the idiosyncrasy?) in a manipulated (membership, framed agenda), unnatural group environment (Fallon, *et.al.*, 2002; Kitzinger 1994, 1995; Warr 2005), through and from which new information and knowledge, as well as perspectives, can be derived and generated, regardless of the ability of the group facilitator (researcher) to guide the course of discussions. Hence, the knowledge building process is much contingent upon the pre-existing conditions (for conditional recruitment of the participants) such as norms, beliefs and stigma on certain subject matters and target groups which are all beyond the control of research agency.

Third, the analytical and interpretive aspects of FG are challenging. A sociologically imaginative approach of analysis should be attempted; given the fact that

These qualities of focus group interaction mean that standard analytical techniques for qualitative research—content and thematic analyses—must be adapted to accommodate the qualities of such interaction. For analysis, the substantive complexity of focus group data becomes quickly apparent because the interactions have multiple voices and can contain numerous subjects and themes. Focus groups are particularly effective in identifying the angles of consensus and division within groups, and interactions should also be classified according to the prevailing tone of the discussion (Warr 2005: 204).

Fourth and in actuality, the newly discovered information and perspectives derived from FG are in most cases beyond the given set of scientific and/or policy framework, let alone the interpretative ability and analytical power of the researcher(s) – though for obvious reasons, they can be incorporated into the existing paradigm, resulting for better interpretation for the relevant issue or fine-tuning for policy initiatives. In short, the FG derived answers are not simple to be readily available for policy adoption or scientific conceptualization. In some cases, the newly acquired information might ‘unnecessary’ pro-long the policy making or scientific discovery

(for publication)! Perhaps because of the complexity of the findings from FG, it seems that majority of the researches use the method as one of the investigation tools (among or paralleling others in the so-called multi-method investigation), or the FG is being one-shot without repetition of the same group gathering, nor taking a longitudinal exercise on the group.

Last but not least: the costing and logistics requirements for organizing FG, the training for the facilitators' group managing skills, as well as the positive participation of the group members, are more than financial inputs. All these make the seemingly simple and easy-going get-to-gather encounter(s) for FG not just a rather expensive and complicated one to organize, but also an unpredictable one for new discoveries and chaotic group process.

In spite of these problems, FG are undoubtedly a good learning process for researchers and policy agencies who dare to ask others to make contribution to their endeavors, as participants for FG can make voices, or noises, to the seemingly consensual academic and policy process. Obviously, the critical test will be how well these voices, or noises, being taken up by academics and policy makers. Hence, this methodological approach is still very critical for both academic and policy research useful for people – though the readiness, the consideration and subsequent acceptance, of the voices and ideas once discussed in the FG are much contingent to contextual variables which (like the financial crisis at global scale, or the politicking maneuvering in response to public opinion polls) are beyond the control of anyone.

Based upon our illustrations on FG, our concluding remark here are to stress the importance of the positive use of FG dynamics, the newly discovery of ideas and perspectives offered by group members, the enabling of good quality of academic and policy research work with emphasis on the possibility of the co-evolutionary scientific discovery between researchers and group participants. Obviously, the FG research design has its comparative advantages over other qualitative research methodologies for the maximal participation with-and-by 'others'.

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